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Measuring women's unpaid work

It is still before sunrise, about 6:30 a.m., when the researcher arrives at the family's doorstep. For the next hour, as unobtrusively as possible, she records what each household member is doing, at that hour probably washing and getting dressed, preparing breakfast, feeding livestock, gathering materials for school or market. Each separate activity is timed, and all interactions within the household recorded — a mother helping a child or elderly parent with shoes or hair, for instance. For the rest of the day, the researcher will alternate visits at this and another nearby household, observing all activities and interviewing household members on their activities during her absence. To minimize intrusion, no more than four hours are spent with either family in a given day.

The researcher is taking the first painstaking steps in the process of gathering gender statistics. The technique is an old one, a time-use study. The results will be new: when compiled, the data will capture many activities not captured before. Up to now, these activities have been statistically invisible. They are usually not included in conventional data collection, and are therefore largely unvalued — and are mostly undertaken by women. A few examples tell the story: the woman who works as a dressmaker in her spare time who is paid in cash or in kind by her customers, the income unrecorded and the final product uncounted; the older woman who cares for her grandchildren while her daughter is away at work; the farmer's wife who helps plant and harvest the commercial crops, tends the poultry and the kitchen garden completely unassisted and is unpaid. Her role as a housewife, difficult and time-consuming, is not valued in conventional economic terms — and she herself probably thinks of being a housewife as "doing nothing".

The Challenge: Correcting the Database

That informal, unpaid and household production needs to be measured and valued was recognized in principle two decades ago, at the first world conference on women in Mexico City. Despite an avalanche of other computer-generated statistics, there was and still is almost no available data, especially in the developing countries, on the extent and value of what women do. This statistical gap is more than a gender issue: it goes to the heart of effective economic and social policy planning.

Statistics, which may appear mind-numbing to many, are, in fact, the engines that drive the decision-making process. It begins with gross domestic product (GDP). If this base figure is wrong or inadequate, so will be all the government functions which follow, such as social services, urban planning, transportation, education etc.

GDP, a nation's total output of goods and services, tends to omit as much as it includes. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, women are estimated to be responsible for more than 80 per cent of food production for home consumption, and over half of all agricultural production. Official GDP figures for the region, however, generally count only the produce actually brought to market or exported — the cash crops grown largely by men.

Focus on women & UNPAID WORK

The System of National Accounts (SNA), which determines GDP, was revised to include all goods produced in the household and, by extension, production-related activities like water-carrying. All of the dressmaker's output, part of the so-called informal sector, became recognized economic production. Although unpaid domestic and personal services (cooking, mending, child care etc.) are still not included, the 1993 SNA suggests that alternate concepts of GDP be devised for use in satellite accounts.

Eliminating Gender Bias

Clearly, part of the problem lies behind the statistics, in methods that are either gender-biased or at best gender-neutral. In censuses and surveys, for example, a resident male is assumed to be the head of household and is usually the one interviewed. Any bias in his response will be recorded as fact, which, in combination with other similar facts, will ultimately be used to determine government policies.

The challenge for the statistician is to develop and implement new concepts and methods of collecting data that will reflect reality and document changes in the situations of both men and women. This can also mean accounting for factors impacting on gender to reveal some of the causes of inequalities. A tally of schools, for example, should include the number of female students who "drop out". These statistics can indicate where school schedules might be tailored to fit seasonal work patterns in various geographic areas, to encourage more girls to attend and stay in school. Perhaps most important, accurate baseline data will also help Governments set realistic goals —and more effective policies with which to achieve them.

Development of valid gender statistics must be a two-pronged process: eliminating gender bias in conventional data collection and filling in the glaring statistical gap in calculating national productivity, i.e., the contribution of women's — and men's — unpaid and household work. Eliminating gender bias in conventional statistics means reviewing and questioning past assumptions and adapting old techniques accordingly. Age and sex are important variables, and the same questions asked of men and women may elicit very different responses. Routinely interviewing only male heads of household, for instance, may not indicate the true division of responsibilities among family members or reflect the priorities of the whole family. Similarly, policies designed for heads of household do not necessarily mean improvements for the rest of the family. Gender-specific information should therefore be carefully integrated into all conventional censuses and surveys.

Redefining a Day's Work

Currently, there is only one comprehensive technique for measuring unpaid work: systematic time-use surveys to demonstrate how a person uses his or her time, provide accurate estimates of unpaid household activities and show the daily, weekly and seasonal patterns of such activities and their relationship to economic and non-economic activities. Such detailed accountings of how days are spent, whether at work, play, eating or sleeping, have been widely used in the industrialized countries, but in only a handful of developing nations. The techniques usually required — distribution of diaries and interviews by specially trained personnel — are frequently inappropriate to developing countries, particularly in remote rural areas, where literacy rates tend to be low.

It is precisely in these areas that the need for basic data is greatest, however. In Nepal, for example, although more than two thirds of family income is generated by household-level enterprises, including subsistence agriculture, 1993 GDP figures indicate that much of the post-harvest or later food processing, done primarily by women, is left out; only the production of cottage and other industries is included. This means that GDP omits many minor crops grown — mainly by women—for household consumption.

New techniques being developed by researchers are designed to capture uncounted work as well as the potentially far greater economic contribution of domestic services. All data is separated by gender to reflect the true impact of these activities on both the household's welfare

and the national economy as a whole. Statisticians in several countries are currently working to develop a new satellite accounts sys' 'm to help document and further define the dimensions and productivity of the household economy.

Separate categories would be established to include all unpaid activities done for others, such as cleaning, laundry, handling family finances etc. The new satellite accounts system would also include "personal development" activities, such as education and skills training, which have important investment value. These would be calculated as part of an extended concept of GDP. Other personal activities, such as eating, sleeping and recreation, which clearly cannot benefit or be performed by anyone else, would be categorized as either personal maintenance (e.g. washing one's own hair as opposed to giving someone else a shampoo) or personal consumption (e.g., reading, watching TV). These would be excluded from the actual accounting of production, but the time spent on them might be measured as a component of the quality of life.

Potential Pitfalls

Of course there are some problems in the time-use approach. For example, practically no one engages in any activity in isolation or in strict sequence. Many different tasks and the time spent on them tend to be simultaneous or to overlap. Simultaneous activities are frequent in a household environment, particularly where child care is involved. Rarely does a mother do anything, whether cooking a meal or travelling to visit a friend, that doesn't coincide with some other activity related to child care. These same overlapping activities can cross into the economic area as well, e.g. a mother tending a cash crop with a child at her side.

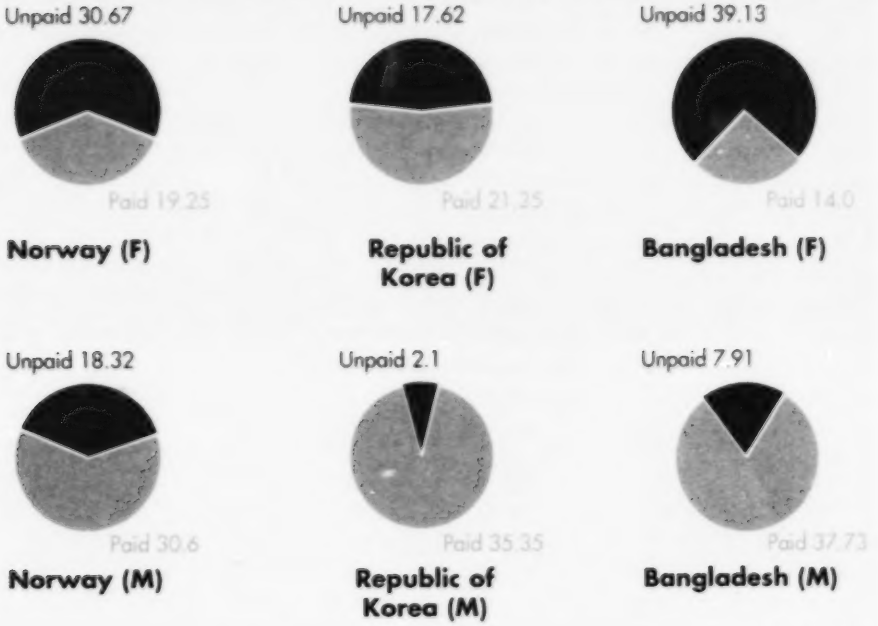
Next Steps

Despite these problems, collection of time-use data remains the only valid method for capturing normally overlooked activities. Development of general methodological guidelines, a combination of conventional statistical theory and field observation, is the necessary next step.

One survey, which included the pre-dawn visit described earlier, used conventional time diaries which were completed using a combination of direct observation and a listing of activities recalled by the subjects during face-to-face interviews. It was designed to document all productive activities undertaken by the men, women and children in 100 households. Five different communities were selected to represent a cross-section of the society at all income levels, in both urban and rural settings. The results were encouraging; the time-use data did in fact reveal many activities not before included in statistics.

The establishment of a system

Time Allocations Between Paid and Unpaid Work by Sex, 1990-1991



Source: INSTRAW

of satellite accounts to include unpaid domestic services would estimate the quantity and value of all these statistically "new" activities. In one approach, this means estimating the market value of the labour inputs, which in turn requires carefully measuring the time used. There is a broad range of possible methods to be used to value non-market production — for example, by determining the number of shirts or dresses a woman could make and sell in the time she spends on child care every day. The time-use study would indicate the amount of time spent; the market price of the hypothetical garments would equal the value of that time.

The impact of a system of satellite accounts could be enormous, helping to provide an accurate accounting of essentially very private matters for crucial public purposes. While development policies are generally geared to increasing productivity, increases in productivity are not necessarily reflected in increases or improvements in standards of living. In the industrialized countries, for instance, there are questions about the real benefits of full-time employment for mothers in the absence of adequate child-care arrangements or more sharing of household responsibilities by fathers. In the developing countries, living standards may actually deteriorate while GDP rises. Preliminary studies in Nepal show that as a result of increased commercialization of farm produce, household members tend to work longer hours, travel farther, spend more on superfluous consumer goods and sometimes even eat less, as more and more home production is sent to market. Economic development, in this case, is an illusion.

Inclusion of time-use data and the establishment of a satellite system of national accounting will dispel the illusions and make clear the magnitude and value of unpaid household work. Perhaps more important, it will show that the burden is carried disproportionately by women, beginning with the fact that they almost invariably work longer hours. In the case of Nepal, time-use data show that women not only match men hour for hour in paid work, but in non-marketable activities they outwork men by two to one.

Equally significant, placing a recognized value on unpaid work will demonstrate a woman's social as well as economic contribution as a provider of a wide range of vital services. This is particularly true in many rural areas, where there may be no services available and women have generally provided them without recognition or assistance. With statistical visibility and value, women would be entitled to access to the same services — education, health care, sanitation etc. — as the rest of the society.

The next steps will inevitably be a process of trial and error. Any new techniques will require testing, refinement and, to the extent possible, standardization. Finding a statistically valid formula for measuring and evaluating the data collected will require accounting for wide variations in local and national conditions. The procedure will be exacting and tedious, but ultimately will bring the long-range goal set at Mexico City into reach: the heretofore invisible contributions of women will become visible — accepted, evaluated and integrated into the world's economies.

(Written in association with the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW).